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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the role played by the Title I (now Chapter 1) Evaluation Technical Assistance Centers in providing technical assistance to state and local agencies. It presents (1) a legistative history; (2) the Technical Assistance Center (TAC) activities under Title I; (3) an evaluation of the TACs; (4) the legislative changes enacted by the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act, Chapter 1; (5) Chapter 1 TAC contracts and activities; and (6) several questions about the future of TACs: are TACs still needed, are TACs an effective and efficient means of providing service, and will TACs continue to be effective? It would appear that, in spite of over 6 years of Federal evaluation assistance through the TACs, little progress seems to have been made in establishing evaluation as a state and local priority. The selection and training of program evaluators typically has been a low priority for state and local education agencies. Few states have established criteria for program evaluators. In some cases, evaluation has not been perceived as a worthwhile activity; in other cases, the need for training has not been seen. Therefore, Federal technical assistance providers have been used to provide training for new untrained staff, as well as for local and state personnel who want to improve their skills. Steps need to be taken to reduce the dependency on Federal assistance through a reassessment of the purpose and implementation of federally funded assistance activities. (Author/PN)

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IS THERE A NEED FOR FEDERAL TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTERS UNDER CHAPTER 1?

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Is There a Need for Federal Technical Assistance Centers Under Chapter 1?

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The role of the Federal government in federally-funded elementary and secondary school programs has changed greatly over the years, as have federal evaluation and technical assistance activities. The Federal role has changed particularly with regard to evaluation of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 and related programs of technical assistance. The purpose of this paper is to review the role played by the Title I (now Chapter 1) Evaluation Technical Assistance Centers in providing technical assistance to State and local education agencies.

Legislative History

During the early years of the program, State and local education agencies conducted evaluations of their own design, and the variation in the type and quality of the evaluations was marked. National information was limited. In response to the need for national data on Title I, which had become the largest elementary and secondary school federal aid program, Congress in the 1974 Amendments to ESEA directed the Office of Education (now the Department of Education) to provide evaluation models for district Title I programs, specifically:

> "Section 151(d). The Commissioner shall provide to State educational agencies, models for evaluation of all programs conducted under this title, for their use in carrying out their functions under section 142(a), which shall include uniform procedures and criteria to be utilized by local educational agencies as well as by the State agency in the evaluation of such programs...
>
> (e). The Commissioner shall provide such technical and other assistance to State educational agencies to enable them to assist local educational agencies in the development of programs in accordance with the models developed by the Commissioner.
>
> (f). The models developed by the Commissioner shall specify objective criteria which shall be utilized in the evaluation of all programs and shall outline techniques (such as longitudinal studies of children involved in such proram) and methodology (such as the use of tests which yield comparable results) for producing data which are comparable on a statewide and nationwide basis."

The Office of Education (OE) responded to Section 151(e) by producing documents and funding ten Title I Technical Assistance Centers (TACs) in 1976. The Technical Assistance Centers provided consulting services to State and local education agencies that receive Title I funds, with no direct charge for the consultation to recipients. The TACs operated at the direction of the State education agencies within guidelines established by the Department of Education. Emphasis was placed on providing services which were tailored

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to the needs of each State, which resulted in different delivery modes as well as levels of service across the States. The primary objective of the project was to provide training and improved capabilities for SEA and LEA personnel in evaluation and program management, but, of course, an additional goal was assisting State and local personnel to implement the mandated evaluation models.

In the 1978 Amendments, the intent of Section 151 was continued in Section 183. In addition, Section 183(i) required that "In carrying out the provisions of this section, the Commissioner shall place priority on assisting States, local educational agencies, and State agencies to conduct evaluations, and shall, only as funds are available after fulfilling that purpose, seek to conduct any national evaluations of the program."

TAC Activities Under Title I

The ten TACS provided a high level of service to their clients: during the 12 month period from October 1981 through September 1982, they provided 3,261 workshops and on-site consulations to over 40,000 clients. In addition, they provided numerous telephone consultation and provided information by mail. Activities included assisting SEAs and LEAs to plan and implement valid evaluations, to analyze and interpret the evaluations, and to conduct more in-depth technical investigations to improve or refine evaluation procedures and programs. The TACs also developed materials for use in SEA- and LEA-sponsored workshops or in a stand-alone capacity and sponsored regional meetings to discuss evaluation issues with State representatives. TACs were contractually prohibited from interpreting State or Federal laws and policies, providing advise regarding specific educational curricula, endorsing specific tests or instruments, and conducting evaluations or writing evaluation reports for SEAs and LEAs.

In addition, the Department sponsored two supporting activities in the TACs: a test information center and a materials clearinghouse. The test information center served as a centralized test information resource for all TACs to use when providing information to their clients. The center was established in response to a need for specific information about the many tests being used across the nation for Title I evaluation and served to minimize duplication of TAC and test publishers' efforts. The center proved influential in alerting SEA and LEA personnel to the importance of appropriate tests selection and administration, of correct scoring and interpretation, and in appropriate use of test results for needs assessment and diagnosis. The materials clearinghouse provided centralized information on TAC workshop materials as well as materials produced by others that were useful for TAC workshops and consultations.

By the 1981-82 school year, TACs were mainly involved in six major areas: program improvement evaluation, improved testing procedures, needs assessment, quality control systems, sustained effects evaluation, and identifying exemplary projects.

Evaluation of the TACs

In August of 1978, the Office of Education established an independent panel to review the activities of the Technical Assistance Centers. The panel noted that the program was working well (Millman, Paisley, Rogers, Sanders, & Womer, 1979) but recommended several changes, including contracting for assistance on a three year cycle, increasing TAC staff development, emphasizing evaluation for program improvement, increasing inter-TAC coordination, funding TACs in an equitable manner that includes a consideration of both regional size and regional need, and establishing a uniform cost/effort reporting for individual TACs. The Office of Education considered these finding when planning the new TAC procurement.

In order to assess the effectiveness of the changes, the Department of Education commissioned a further study of the Technical Assistance Centers as part of an assessment of the entire Title I evaluation and reporting system (Reisner, Alkin, Boruch, Linn, and Millman, 1982). Millman provided information on the effectiveness of the Technical Assistance Centers and made further recommendations for change. He noted that since their establishment in 1976, the TACS had shifted from an emphasis on helping clients implement the TIERS models to an emphasis on improving the quality and utility of information generated by TIERS. The SEAs reported satisfaction with the performance of the TACs, and most saw a continuing need for TAC services. Millman reported, however, that the federally supported services provided by the TACs were quite expensive when measured in terms of costs per hour of TAC service (Reisner, et. al., 1982, page iii).

Legislative Changes: ECIA Chapter 1

In 1981, Congress enacted the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act, in which ESEA Title I was streamlined and became Chapter 1. Evaluation is still a requirement of the law, but the Department of Education was prohibited from mandating evaluation models. Under Chapter 1, local education agencies are equired to file applications with their States that provide assurances that they "will keep such records and provide such information to the State educational agency as may be required for fiscal audit and program evaluation" (Section 556(b) of Chapter 1, and in addition are required to assure that the programs and projects would be evaluated. Section 555(b)(4) states that:

> "[projects] will be evaluated in terms of their effectiveness in achieving the goals set for them, and that such evaluations shall include objective measurements of educational achievement in basic skills and a determination of whether improved performance is sustained over a period of more than one year."

Section 591(b) of Chapter 3 prohibits the Secretary of Education from issuing regulations on evaluation:

> "(b) In all other matters relating to the details of planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating programs and projects by State and local educational agencies the Secretary shall not issue regulations, but may consult with appropriate State, local, and private educational agencies

and, upon request, provide technical assistance, information, and suggested guidelines designed to promote the development and implementation of effective instructional programs and to otherwise assist in carrying out the purposes of this subtitle."

In addition, according to a study of State management practices (American Insitutes for Research, 1982), many State Chapter 1 offices have been required to reduce their staff due to a reducation in money for State administration from 1-1/2 percent to 1 percent of State Chapter 1 funding. A reduction in staff at the State level may mean that less time will be available for technical assistance activities, including training of LEA staff, although reduced administrative tasks may minimize the loss. States have not tended to make up for the loss in Federal funds by supplying supplemental State funds.

Chapter 1 Technical Assistance Centers

In October 1982, the Department of Education awarded new contracts to Technical Assistance Centers. Whereas under Title I there were ten TACs funded at approximately $8.5 million, there are under Chapter 1 four TACs funded at $5.2 million. Given the 40% cutback in funding, assistance will be reduced even though the TACs are encouraged to search for less expensive methods of providing assistance. Requests for assistance could actually increase, however, as State staff levels are reduced and as local education agencies decide to develop new or expanded evaluation designs.

Table 1 provides information on the direct service activities of the TACs during the first four months of the contract. If the TACs provide workshops and consulations at the same rate over the entire first year of the contract, there will be a 28% cutback in workshops and on-site consultations compared to the prior year. The cutback will probably be less severe than this however, because the level of service provided during the first few months of the new contract period was probably below what the typical level will be once the TACs have re-established their working relationships with the States.

In addition to the direct service activities, TAC staff produced workshop materials and other instructional packages. These included information on sustained effects, needs assessment, student selection, functional level testing, time-on-task, and microcomputers. TACs are being encouraged to rely to a greater extent than in the past on existing materials, including both those developed by the TACs in prior years and those developed by other sources. As State and local education agencies change their evaluation designs and activities, however, existing materials are becoming less useful.

Table 1

Chapter 1 Technical Assistance Center Direct Service Activities
During October 1982 Through January 1983

Workshops	
Number	257
Number of Clients	7,474
Number of Service Hours	700
Number of Client Hours	20,706
Number of TAC Person-Hours	1,366
On-Site Consultations	
Number	528
Number of Clients	1,650
Number of Service Hours	1,332
Number of Client Hours	6,062
Number of TAC Person-Hours	1,768
Number of Telephone Calls for Provision of Assistance	1,812
Number of Letters for Provision of Assistance	1,063

Notes: The number of service hours is the length of the activity. For example, if two TAC presenters gave a 3 hour workshop, the number of service hours for that workshop would be 3.

The number of TAC person-hours is the number of TAC presenters multiplied by the length of the activity. For example, if two TAC presenters gave a 3 hour workshop, the number of TAC person-hours is 6.

The number of client hours is the number of clients present at the activity multiplied by the length of the activity. For example, if 50 clients attended a 3 hour workshop, the number of client hours would be 150.

Continuation of Technical Assistance Centers

While is is clear that the Technical Assistance Centers are being requested to provide numerous services for State and local education agencies under Chapter 1, the continuance the TACs must be questioned. The decision is complicated, and it involved several related questions. These include: Are TACS still needed? If so, are they an efficient and effective method of providing the needed services? And, given the changes in legislation and needs of the SEAs and LEAs, will TACs continue to be effective?

Need for TAC services. The primary mission of the TACs is one of capacity building, which leads one to the question of why, if TACs have been working to build State and local evaluation capabilities for over six years, they are still in business.

One reason for the continued need for TAC services is the large turnover in evaluation staff at the State and local levels. This problem became more intense at the State level during the change from ESEA to ECIA. TAC staff are providing many of the same types of training activities over and over again, but to new staff. TAC training is needed because, typical district, the staff selected to perform the program evaluations have no training or experience in evaluation. Few education programs in universities and colleges provide training in testing, measurement, or evaluation for future teachers, but teachers are apt to be the ones selected to evaluate programs. This is particularly true in smaller districts, where there is no full-time evaluator. (Remember that over half of all public school systems have less than 1,000 pupils.) It continues to be true in larger districts, however, since many States do not have certification criteria for evaluators.

However, if evaluation is seen to be a worthwhile activity by States, it would seem that States should be assuming a leadership position in assuring that State and local personnel who are selected to conduct program evaluations are qualified to do so. The presence of Federal Technical Assistance Centers may actually hinder the development of standards for evaluators--after all, if the TACs will train new personnel, what incentive is there to select qualified staff, or to provide training to unqualified staff who are serving as evaluators on an "emergency" basis?

It can be argued that State and local education agencies are unable to provide money for training of staff, particularly at this time. While it is true that many State and local agencies are going through a period of fiscal crisis, setting standards for evaluators or providing additional evaluation training to existing staff should not prove to be particularly costly--and might well be cost less than providing Federally-funded assistance. Furthermore, in other areas, means of providing training for staff have been found. A current example is the area of computer literacy. While this is a new area, and few teachers have the necessary background to teach the subject, districts are proceding with no need for the types of assistance that were provided through the TACS for evaluation. Districts are finding funds for training staff, and in many cases, staff may be paying for their own training at local colleges or other institutions.

Are TACs and effective and efficient means of providing servces? Two independent evaluations of the Technical Assistance Centers have affirmed that the TACs are providing quality services and that the vast majority of their clients have been satisfied with those services. This has led many to question the wisdom of altering the ways in which technical assistance is provided--the "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" model. While this conservative approach is not without merit, and while change may have its dangers, the approach is as likely as not to prove injurious in the long run. Progress in any area involves refinement and the incorporation of new approaches. The horse-drawn buggy wasn't broke, but that didn't stop far-sighted people from inventing the automobile.

Federal funds for technical assistance have decreased while the demand for services has not, and this one change may force alternative methods of service delivery. Few State Chapter 1 coordinators may be aware of the actual costs of providing TAC on-site activities, let alone the additional costs of preparation for the activities and materials development. The Coordinators who are in favor of continuing TACs without change are often the same people who bemoan the cost of hiring local consultants, who, when all costs of staff salaries and benefits, travel, and overhead are considered, are probably far less expensive. Would a Coordinator who values and is satisfied with TAC services continue to favor those services over those of local personnel if he or she were required to pay for them?

Will TACs continue to be effective? Part of the reason for the early success of the Technical Assistance Centers may have been their set agenda, which was to assist with the implementation of the Title I models. TACs quickly moved into related areas, such as test selection and interpretation, student selection, and evaluation for program improvement, but the changes were gradual, and came during a time of higher funding for TACs. Provision of services to large groups through workshops was feasible, which reduced the costs per client served. As State and local education agencies develop more diverse evaluation plans, the TACs will be required to provide much more individualized services, which may make it possible for them to serve far fewer clients effectively.

Conclusions

While the Technical Assistance Centers have been well-received by State and local personnel, it may be time to question their future role. In spite of over six years of Federal evaluation assistance through the TACs, little progress seems to have been made in establishing evaluation as a State and local priority. The selection and training of program evaluators typically has been a low priority for State and local education agencies. Few State have established criteria for program evaluators. In some cases, evaluation has not been perceived as a worthwhile activity; in other cases, the need for training has not been seen. Therefore, Federal technical assistance providers have been used to provide training for new untrained staff, as well as for local and State personnel who want to improve their skills. Steps need to be taken to reduce the dependency on Federal assistance through a reassessment of the purpose and implementation of Federally-funded assistance activities.